New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1948

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Theatre Critics Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers

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NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK MIRROR
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"Sleepy Hollow"

The New York Times

JUNE 4, 1948

'Sleepy Hollow' Turns Legend by Washington Irving Into a Dutch Musical Play

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Going back to Washington Irving, some people of taste and talent have made an unhackneyed musical play out of "Sleepy Hollow," which opened at the St. James last evening. Although Mr. and Mrs. Russell Maloney have not manufactured much of a musical comedy book, they have caught the quality of a legend, which is artless and joyous. And George Lessner has distinguished himself by writing an original score on the foundations of folk music.

Fortunately, it is extremely well sung. Hayes Gordon is a superb baritone who can also act and ought to stimulate some other composers to write original music. And Betty Jane Watson matches him as a soprano; she has a rich voice and an enchanting acting style. Since Mr. Lessner has written some of his best music for them, their duets are delightful.

* * *

For comedy there is Gil Lamb, who is a droll and inventive mountebank with a gift for characterization. He is tall, dazed and anatomical and, like Ichabod Crane, he is legendary, too. Nowadays it is difficult to find a comedian who can move on the stage and who has voice enough to sing a song intelligibly. But Mr. Lamb is a professional mime who has worked up a fresh characterization, who dances in humorous rhythms and sings "Poor Man" resourcefully and well. Like Mr. Gordon and Miss Watson, Mr. Lamb is a trouper worth keeping in the neighborhood. For they are all professionals and they have not been tarnished by Broadway yet.

It would be ideal if the play as a whole were up to its best people. It is the story of how Ichabod Crane strays into Sleepy Hollow, falls timidly in love with a coquettish maiden and becomes a faltering third figure in a triangle. But in Mr. and Mrs. Maloney's telling, the story remains diffuse and ambiguous. Although John O'Shaughnessy, as the director, has apparently tried to give it momentum by discharging groups of people through it by shot-gun musketry, the stage spectacle is often busy without significance, and the sequences are frequently confusing. Perhaps the authors and directors have taken the legend of the headless horseman too literally. There is a headless quality to the way they ride their story. Or perhaps the musical-play form does not suit the Washington Irving legend, as the method of "Ballet Ballads" ideally suits the legends of Susanna and the Elders and Davey Crockett.

In the current instance, the uncertainty of the story is a pity, since it falls to project the best things in this production. Mr. Lessner's music recaptures a Hudson River period admirably, and Elie Siegmeister's choral arrangements are remarkably stirring out of some real American memories. To visualize the many details of the story, Jo Mielziner has had to crowd the stage with scenery, which cramps the stage for dancing. But Anna Sokolow has once or twice found space for some light colonial dance patterns and some very pleasant dancers. Taking advantage of a good opportunity, David Ffolkes has designed Dutch colonial costumes that are as unhackneyed as the theme and lovelier than anything Washington Irving ever imagined.

* * *

We are getting some attractive young people in musical shows these days. They are free from night-club pallor. In "Sleepy Hollow" there is Mary McCarthy, as a hot-tempered hussy; Ward Gardner, a bucolic hoofer, and Dorothy Bird, a wisp of a dancer with a prim manner. They are the more conspicuous performers in a skilfully selected cast. If the book and the staging of "Sleepy Hollow" were more expert, the old Washington Irving characters and background would appear to have a simpler vitality on the stage. As it is, the music and the singing are fresh and exhilarating; Mr. Lamb is vastly enjoyable and the entire enterprise has a flavor of originality and charm.

SLEEPY HOLLOW!

SLEEPY HOLLOW, a musical play based on Washington Irving's "Legend of Sleepy Hollow." Book and lyrics by Russell Maloney and Miriam Battista, suggested by Nicholas Bela. Music by George Lessner. Production directed by John O'Shaughnessy; scenery and lighting by Jo Mielziner; musical numbers and dances staged by Anna Sokolow; costumes by David Ffolkes; musical director, Irving Actman; orchestrations by Hans Spialek, Ted Royal and Mr. Lessner; choral arrangements by Elie Siegmeister; additional lyrics by Ruth Hughes Aarons; the management gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Marc Connelly; produced by Lorraine Lester. At the St. James Theatre.

Ira	William Ferguson
Roelf	Larry Robbins
Mrs. Van Brunt	Laura Pierpont
Mrs. Van Tassel	Ruth McDevitt
Mrs. Van Ripper	Jean Handzlik
Wilhelmina	Ellen Repp
Mr. Van Brunt	Bert Wilcox
Mr. Van Tassel	Tom Heler
Mr. Van Ripper	Morley Evans
Jacob Van Tassel	Bobby White
Willie Van Twiller	Walter Butterworth
Hans Van Ripper	Alan Shay
Martin Van Horpen	Richard Rhoades
Storveling Van Doorn	Lewis Schelle
Twins	Dorothy Lane
Hilda	Robin Sloan
Greta	Sylvia Lane
Brom "Bones" Van Brunt	Hayes Gordon
Katrina Van Tassel	Betty Jane Watson
Hendrick	Ward Gardner
Eva	Mary McCarty
Luther	Russell George
Ichabod Crane	Gil Lamb
Annie	Margery Chaldwyn
Lena	Peggy Ferris
Mick	Franklin Wagner
Pat	Shaun O'Brien
Ball	Ray Drakeley
Walt	James Starbuck
Chris	John Ward
Berth	Margaret Ritter
Margret	Jo Sullivan
Elizabeth	Kaia Sundsten
Jenny	Ann Dunbar
Mr. Van Hooten	Ken Peters
Scout	John Russell
Conscience	Ty Kenney
Indian	Kenneth Remo
Cotton Mather	William Mende
The Lady from New Haven	Dorothy Bird

Herald Tribune

JUNE 4, 1948

By HOWARD BARNES

Slumbers in Spots

TO PUT it bluntly, the settings and costumes are the distinguishing features of "Sleepy Hollow," a moribund musical play which has come to the St. James Theater. The stylish decor is enhanced somewhat by a pleasant George Lessner score and some energetic dancing, but the show is hollow to the core. Russell Maloney and Miriam Battista have tried to make a tuneful travesty based on Washington Irving's "Legend of Sleepy Hollow." Unfortunately, their book is inert and their lyrics no more than ordinary. Since Gil Lamb, Betty Jane Watson and Hayes Gordon are none of them dynamic enough to make the principal roles carry the production, it sags continually.

* * *

The Maloney-Battista salute to Ichabod Crane and the Dutch burghers living by the Tappan Zee on the east bank of the Hudson, is woefully lean on bright lines and funny situations. The general idea is to make Ichabod a comical figure, as he is stopped on his advance from New Haven into Indian territory circa 1795. The angular Lamb does quite a bit to make the figure likable, but it is never sympathetic and rarely amusing. His near break-up of a romance between Katrina Van Tassel and Brom Van Brunt is stretched to the breaking point and it breaks. The interludes of song and dance, which bring in the Headless Horseman, Ichabod's conclense and the ghost of Cotton Mather are more grotesque than laughable.

* * *

It is a pity that such a handsome offering generally fails to kindle. Jo Mielziner's settings and lighting might have framed a joyous period carnival. The David Ffolkes costumes are elegant. As can so often happen in the theater, the sheer splendor of the production merely serves to accentuate the deficiencies of the material. There is a nice song called "Here and Now," chanted engagingly by Miss Watson, and Gordon and danced to with agility by Dorothy Bird and James Starbuck. "I'm Lost" finds Gordon at his best and there is a fresh and striking Bouree, danced to by the ensemble of villagers. The Headless Horseman ballet, on the other hand, is random in its movements. Anna Sokolow has created good, bad and indifferent choreography for a piece which needed the very best.

* * *

Mary McCarty and Ward Gardner team up in several blithe interludes as a dizzy Sleepy Hollow couple. And Ellen Repp and Bobby White work strenuously to give some body to the St. James proceedings. They have been staged by John O'Shaughnessy with an assist from Marc Connelly. The show moves at too halting a pace for a musical comedy that has a minimum of wit. "Sleepy Hollow" is good-looking and intermittently zestful. On the whole it is more sleepily than stimulating.

Journal American

JUNE 4, 1948

Irving's Old Story Drowsy and Empty

By ROBERT GARLAND

It was a mistake, I feel, for Nicholas Bela to bring the idea up in the first place. Of making a musical play out of Washington Irving's old and not very interesting story about the Headless Horseman. But, following Mr. Bela's original suggestion, Russell Maloney and Miriam Battista got to work on the book and lyrics, while George Lessner turned his attention to the music.

The result, plus direction by John O'Shaughnessy, scenery by Jo Mielziner, dances by Anna Sokolow, costumes by David Ffolkes, orchestrations by Hans Spialek, Ted Royal and Mr. Lessner, chorals by Elie Siegmeister, more lyrics by Ruth Aarons, sounds by Masque Engineering Company, bras by Model Brassiere Corporation, suggestions by Marc Connelly and—

Well, it took a heap of help to get it all on stage at the St. James as an epilogue to "Oklahoma." But there it is, presented by Lorraine Lester and entitled, somewhat prophetically, I fear, "Sleepy Hollow." Not even a cast in which there are 40 speaking parts can make it sound anything but drowsy and empty. It sounds drowsier and emptier as it proceeds . . .

It's intentions, let me tell you, are far better than their fulfillment!

* * *

Falls on Fantasy

When co-working on their libretto, Mr. Maloney and Miss

Batista couldn't make up their minds whether to write with their tongues in their cheeks or their belief in Washington Irving. They ended up by doing both. Consequently, "Sleepy Hollow," set to songs and dances, is neither fearsome, funny nor good old Hudson River folklore. It falls flat on its fantasy in between.

Ichabod Crane—a figure of fun, but not much of it—arrives in Sleepy Hollow en route to the wild, woolly and Indian-infected West. "There's History To Be Made," he sings, and then proceeds not to make it. Instead, he hangs unhappily around the Tappan Zee as one part of an eternal triangle of which Brom Van Brunt and Kathie Van Tassel are the others.

The Headless Horseman turns out to be a not very practical joke on the part of Ichabod's companions. In luminous paint they scrawl his name on a handy tombstone. And while under the influence of Hudson River Valley Rum, they masquerade in spooky clothes and frighten him with a pumpkin shell with a candle in it. Finally, they permit him to depart to music . . .

I've a feeling—(mistaken, I hope)—that "Sleepy Hollow" is pretty apt to follow!

* * *

All Do Their Best

Nothing had been spared to make "Sleepy Hollow" the great American operetta it isn't. Nothing but a good libretto, good lyrics and some music worthy of them. Everyone, I'm sure, has done his best by the offshoot of Nicholas Bela's original suggestion. But only the best of the designers, who are Jo Mielziner, and David Ffolkes, come across with hoped for impressiveness.

As Ichabod Crane, Gil Lamb brings his—to me—unfamiliar vaudeville routine to a role that calls for, at least, Ray Bolger. Hayes Gordon, graduate of the Paper Mill Playhouse, plays Brom Van Brunt in a biggish, backward way. Betty Jane Watson returns to the St. James stage as an alumna of "Oklahoma."

The music supplied by George Lessner, whose works have been performed by the New York Philharmonic and the Hollywood soundtracks, will never become a nuisance on the air or in a jukebox. The "Headless Horseman Ballet," choreographed by Anna Sokolow would be fun at a Halloween party for not-too-imaginative kiddies. So much for last night's "Sleepy Hollow" . . .

I'm for pretending that the Season of 1948-1949 hasn't really started.

The Sun

JUNE 4, 1948

'Sleepy Hollow' at St. James Is Musical Version of Irving Legend.

A big cast, containing considerable talent, strives valiantly to translate Washington Irving's famous legend into an evening of musical enchantment in the new musical play, "Sleepy Hollow," which had its premiere last night at the St. James Theater. Success, however, eludes the group.

For this Russell Maloney and his wife, Miriam Battista, who collaborated on the book for the show, will have to shoulder the major share of the blame. It may be that the story of the sudden departure of the schoolmaster Ichabod Crane from the hills back of Tarrytown in 1795 furnishes a sound basis for what the Maloneys have attempted, but in their version, they have recaptured only fleetingly the charm of the old tale and its era, and for the most part their retelling of it is inept and tedious.

This is a real pity too, for the high spots in "Sleepy Hollow" are very good indeed. What's more the score that George Lessner has written for the show is delightfully tuneful, and Lorraine Lester, the sponsor, has gathered together some performers who know what to do with a good song. That holds for the chorus as well as the principals.

When Betty Jane Watson, who is fine as the spirited and flirtatious Dutch miss, Katrina Van Tassell, is singing "Here and Now" with Hayes Gordon, who plays the role of Brom Van Brunt, her admiring swain, all's well with the show. The same is true at the close of the first act when Gordon tells of his love in "I'm Lost" and the chorus of villagers swarms out of the church to sing their "Goodnight" song and recount in melody most excellently the horrors of the midnight rides of the headless horseman. For far too much of the way, however, there are long, dull stretches which bog the proceedings down.

Gil Lamb plays Ichabod. His long-legged, lanky frame fits him ideally for the part, and his schoolmaster is likeable and mildly amusing. For most of the evening, however, he is fighting a losing battle with the humorless script for laughs. Young Bobby White turns in a neat bit as a youthful admirer of the teacher, and his scene at the close where he says farewell to Ichabod is one of the best.

The dancing in the main falls short of matching the distinction of the singing, and Anna Sokolow's ballet built around Ichabod's final ride seemed to me merely grotesque. "Sleepy Hollow" has been staged handsomely. Jo Mielziner's settings of a Dutch community of a bygone day are admirable, and the costumes by David Ffolkes are colorful and picturesque.

"Sleepy Hollow" gave the St. James its first premiere in five years. Unfortunately the new tenant in no way does for the lower Hudson valley, what its predecessor, "Oklahoma!" did so gloriously for the Southwest.

HERRICK BROWN.

DAILY NEWS

JUNE 4, 1948

'Sleepy Hollow' Needs Benzedrine

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The St. James Theatre, having waxed fat and sassy for years on a perfect musical comedy, "Oklahoma," got back into show business last evening and may have an uncomfortable awakening today. To the St. James, all mornin's have been beautiful for a long time; this mornin' will be a little different, for a musical titled "Sleepy Hollow" has moved in.

The idea for this show is excellent—a song-and-dance version of Washington Irving's legend. Its company is numerous, amiable and, except for Gil Lamb, handsome. Mr. Lamb is better than handsome: he is ingratiating—a scarecrow of a fellow with a face longer than William S. Hart's, who makes an ideal Ichabod Crane. The show itself is handsome, too, for David Ffolkes has designed the most attractive music-show costumes I have seen in many months.

So far, so good in this report. But show business, as the St. James will be reminding itself, is a heartbreaking business in which high hopes, honorable intentions, intelligence and hard work sometimes fail to produce what had been expected. "Sleepy Hollow" has, as "Oklahoma" didn't have, its handicaps.

Won't Keep Moving.

The first of these is that, prod it as everybody does, it just won't keep moving. It has fits of comedy and starts of action and then it drops back into a snooze. Its best number, in which the sleeping Ichabod is assaulted by his conscience, by Cotton Mather, by an Indian, and by a dancing girl, comes pretty late in the show; and the Headless Horseman scene, which comes even later, is an anti-climax.

The second handicap is a forgettable score by George Lessner, which is not helped any by pedestrian orchestrations devised by the usually clever Hans Spialek and Ted Royal. I marked only two of the songs in my program for attention: "I Still Have Plenty to Learn" and Mr. Lamb's "Poor Man"—and these on account of the lyrics. The lyrics in general, by Russell Maloney and Miriam Battista, are superior to their music.

Ichabod Goes West.

In this version of the Sleepy Hollow legend, Ichabod comes to the village on his way West to fight Indians, is enchanted by a local maiden, remains to teach school and finally is set upon by a horde of headless horsemen.

Betty Jane Watson plays the girl nicely, and Hayes Gordon offers a stout voice and pleasant manner as the farm boy who loves her. Mary McCarty and Ward Garner try to help Mr. Lamb with some comedy but nobody has thought of much for them to do. The chorus dances are fair, and there are some nice specialties by Dorothy Bird and James Starbuck. The settings are by Jo Mielziner, and the best of them is a barn scene.